

Historical houses

PRELIMINARY REPORT

HISTORIC DISTRICT STUDY COMMITTEE

DUXBURY, MASSACHUSETTS

OCTOBER 12, 1990

INTRODUCTION

Whether the viewpoint is that of a Duxbury newcomer, a long-time resident, a land-use consultant, realtor, developer or town official, all would agree that an outstanding feature of the town is its historic character. Recognizing that neither the Protective By-Law nor the National Register District designation serves to protect Duxbury's rich architectural heritage, the Selectmen, at the request of the Planning Board, appointed this seven-member Historic District Study Committee to investigate the feasibility of creating an historic district or districts and adopting an historic district by-law at the Annual Town Meeting.

The general purposes of historic district designation as set forth in the Massachusetts enabling legislation, General Laws, Chapter 40C are:

- 1) to preserve and protect the distinctive characteristics of buildings and places significant in the history of the Commonwealth and its cities and towns;
- 2) to maintain and improve the settings of those buildings and places;
- 3) to encourage new design compatible with existing buildings in the district.

In addition to the obvious benefits of protecting and enhancing the architectural integrity of the streetscape of a neighborhood having a significant concentration of historic structures, a parallel benefit of enacting an historic district by-law and designating a district is the education of Duxbury citizens about the town's history and its architectural inheritance from prior generations. Residents who know and appreciate the value of Duxbury's historic structures will share the goals of protection and preservation in order that the visual and architectural character of Duxbury, which we so enjoy today, may be passed on to future generations.

METHODOLOGY

The study Committee spent a great deal of time discussing and looking at the many historically significant areas in the town. The committee was keenly aware that although more than sixty Massachusetts communities have established local historic districts since 1855, including Hingham, Pembroke, Plymouth, Sandwich and Nantucket, three prior

efforts failed in Duxbury due in no small part to the daunting task of identifying and inventorying the unusually large numbers of architecturally significant structures existing in the town. Indeed, the 1971-1973 Land Use Study Committee identified over 250 structures that predate 1850.

The study committee was also aware that a prior study committee had been instructed by Mrs. Dorothy Wentworth, the then Town Historian, that many of Duxbury's oldest collections of historic structures are in neighborhoods well west of the waterfront areas.

The focus of investigation settled on the High Street neighborhood since it represents precisely the valuable collection of very old dwellings that Mrs. Wentworth recommended. It also is a neighborhood that continues to reflect the character of rural agrarian settlements of Duxbury's earliest farmers. Moreover, the High Street area contains only twenty-one dwellings. Thus, while chosen for the architectural and historic significance of its dwellings as well as its representation of Duxbury's agricultural beginnings, the relatively low density and size of the neighborhood presented a goal which appeared attainable given the non-existent funding of the study committee. Finally, after a neighborhood meeting, follow-up letter and personal contacts with residents, a substantial majority of the owners support the committee's efforts. Many of those owners have contributed greatly to the task of completing the inventory forms filed herewith, not only by graciously giving their time to meet with committee members, but also by sharing their often substantial documentation of the histories of their dwellings.

DESCRIPTION

"Duxborrow Town," as Duxbury was originally called, comprised part of a grant of land to the Plymouth Colony from the great Indian chief, Massasoit. As new settlers arrived and children of the first settlers married, they pushed west beyond the first land grants of 20 acres per person east of Tremont Street and into the "Common Lands," divided in 1710.

The natural path of this expansion was along old Indian trails traversing from Plymouth to Island Creek Village and then west, crossing the North River at Ludden's Ford, finally reaching Boston. This trail, variously named "Bay Path," "Old Massachusetts Path," and in 1685 laid out as the "King's Highway," evolved from trail to horseback way, to a cart way and then coach road.

It was along this ancient way, a part of which is now known as High Street, that the descendents of the Pilgrims settled, cleared the forest for their farms and built the early capes and colonials so admired today. As chronicled by Dorothy Wentworth, the former Town Historian, "Along this old trail went the settlers to Town Meetings, and the families to Church services. Almost every man of prominence in the Pilgrim or Colonial times who had business in Plymouth or Boston passed over the highway. History certainly travelled this road, and to live on High Street today is to live where History was made."

As time passed, many enterprising residents of High Street created a thriving commercial center along the well-travelled highway in Duxbury and Pembroke. As recollected by Helen Melanson in 1961, her grandmother as a child walked with her mother from Tarkiln to the street to do the family shopping. The High Street of that era was a busy, bustling community with stores, a blacksmith shop, a tin shop, bakery, carriage painting establishment, stage coach depot and even a furniture emporium that burned to the ground in the late 1800's.

The earlier residents, like today's, paid scant attention to the Town line dividing Duxbury and Pembroke by the Methodist Church. It was High Street that was the uniting element and the focus of neighborhood ties, rather than an arbitrary municipal boundary.

Upon the by-passing of High Street with the construction of Route 53 in the 1930's, the neighborhood's last commercial enterprises lapsed, and it reverted in character to its pastoral, rural beginnings.

The High Street of today is poignantly evocative of those colonial times. The traveller who leaves busy Route 53 is rewarded with vistas of cranberry bogs and open meadows bounded along the gently curving way by old stone walls and shade trees. The fine capes, colonials and Greek revival farm houses built along the street so long ago have endured with relatively few incongruous additions. Newer houses echo the early architectural styles.

Among the notable examples of historic architecture are four seventeenth and eighteenth century structures. The Barstow House and Delano Cottage (1667) are carefully restored capes. The Loring Tavern (1767) is the only pre-revolutionary colonial in the neighborhood and Standish Farm is a late eighteenth century, stately hip-roof colonial with federal features. The several mid-nineteenth century dwellings include

changes or alterations to structures as well as construction of new structures not visible from High Street are outside of the purview of the Historic District Commission. In other words, any change that cannot be seen from the street cannot be regulated.

The draft ordinance sets forth a number of other exemptions from review including:

- temporary signs or structures
- terraces, walks, driveways, sidewalks, provided they are at grade level and parking is for no more than four vehicles
- storm and screen windows and doors, window air conditioners, antennas
- color of paint or stain
- small wooden signs for residential occupation or professional purposes
- reconstruction of a building or exterior architectural feature damaged or destroyed by fire, storm or disaster, with certain limitations

Interior changes and ordinary maintenance are obviously exempt as well.

Only construction, demolition, alteration, addition or moving of a structure both visible from the street and affecting the long-term architectural integrity of a structure and its surroundings are subject to the review of the Historic District Commission for appropriateness. It is anticipated that the Commission will serve primarily as a source of information and guidance to owners who already value and respect the architectural character of their property and the area generally, and who will want to make changes which enhance that character. An owner for whom regulation would present a hardship may apply for a certificate of hardship.

The by-law will be administered by a seven-member Historic District Commission appointed for three-year terms by the Selectmen. Insofar as possible, the Commission will include one attorney, one each from two nominees of the Rural and Historical Society, the American Institute of Architects and the Greater Boston Real Estate Board, and four who are residents of an historic district. All must be residents of Duxbury.

Pursuant to G.L.c. 40C, a property owner has a right of appeal to Superior Court from any unfair denial of a certificate of appropriateness, or a certificate of hardship or non-applicability as may be the case.

This proposed draft by-law, to be considered at a planned public hearing in early December, presents an opportunity for the High Street neighborhood not only to influence the provisions to be submitted to Town Meeting but also to serve on the first Historic District Commission.

The interest and participation of the High Street residents in this process to date is hopefully a positive portent of the Town's recognition of the benefits of protecting the historic character of the community. It is this interest that reinforced the study committee's belief that the High Street area should be recommended for designation as the King's Highway Historic District in order to preserve the visual qualities of this unique part of Duxbury's architectural heritage.

Respectfully submitted,

Local Historic District Study Committee

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